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25X1

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CONTENTS

LAOS: Communists have launched heavy artillery attacks against Long Tieng. (Page 1)

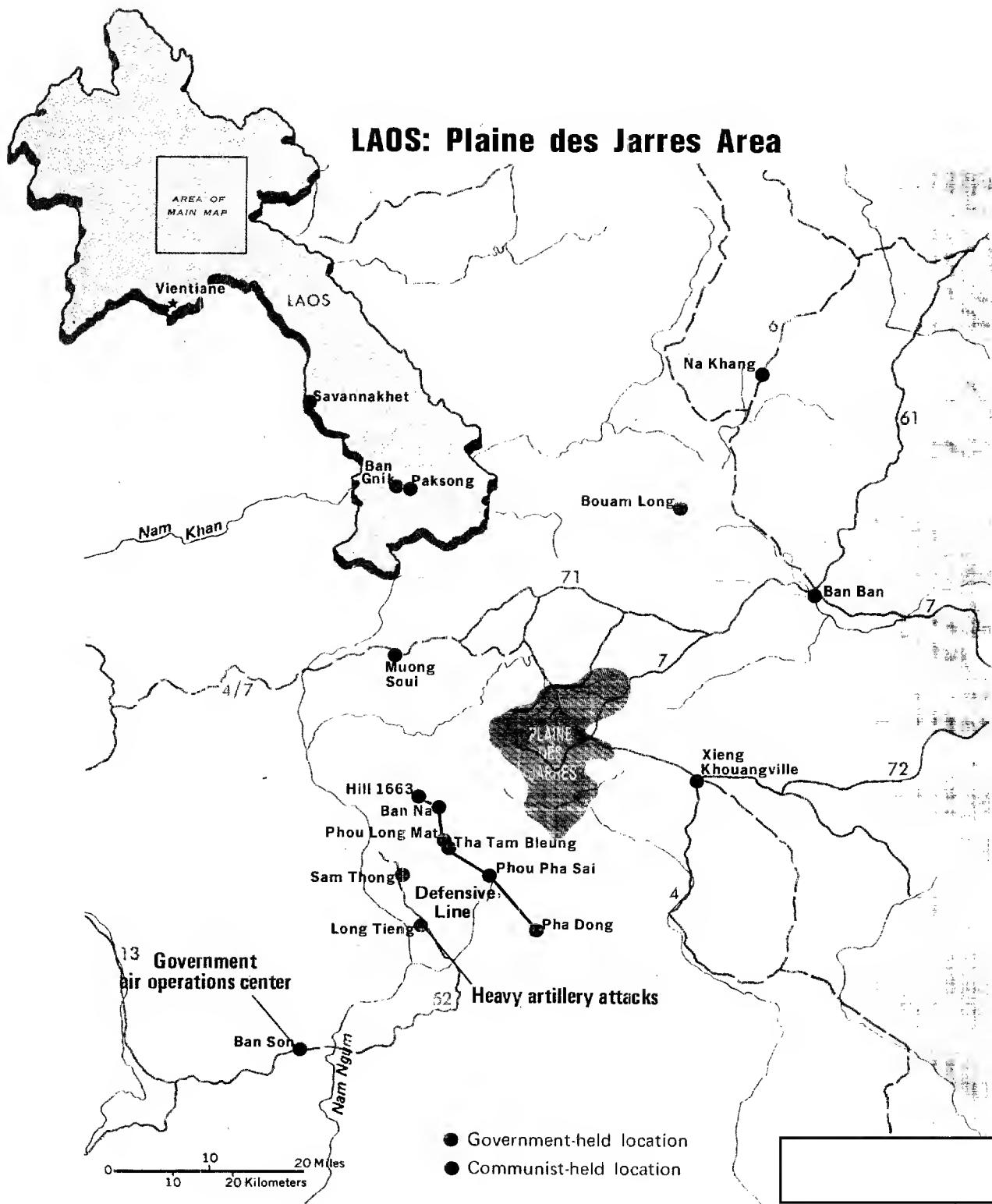
SOUTH ASIA: President Bhutto denies report that the release of Mujibur Rahman is imminent. (Page 2)

MALTA-UK: British prepare to withdraw their troops from Malta. (Page 4)

ISRAEL-JORDAN: Overflights (Page 5)

EGYPT-ISRAEL: Reaction to Phantom sales (Page 5)

SECRET



552377 1-72 CIA

SECRET

LAOS: The Communists have launched heavy artillery attacks against Long Tieng, but no infantry attack has developed.

Since mid-day of 31 December North Vietnamese 130-mm. guns have fired more than 300 rounds into the Long Tieng complex. All the ordnance and buildings of the Lao Air Force have been destroyed and one 105-mm. howitzer disabled. The airstrip is still usable, but the shellings have caused air operations to be shifted to Ban Son, about 18 miles southwest of Long Tieng.

The 130-mm. guns fired from positions just south of the Plaine des Jarres. These sites were struck by US tactical aircraft and gunships on 31 December and 1 January, and pilots believe they may have damaged three guns. Heavy cloud cover and haze have hampered subsequent strikes.

Ground activity in the Long Tieng area has been limited to scattered clashes. A four-battalion irregular task force, totaling over 1,000 men, arrived in Long Tieng from Savannakhet on 31 December. These irregulars, who have been highly effective in south Laos, have been deployed to Tha Tam Bleung and Phou Long Mat, a few miles north of Long Tieng.

In south Laos, Lao Army units manning positions about five miles west of Paksong on the Bolovens Plateau dispersed after they came under heavy attack on 31 December. They left behind several trucks and three 105-mm. howitzers which were later destroyed by air strikes. Other Lao Army units pulled back to an irregular position at Ban Gnik, on the western edge of the Plateau.

25X1

SECRET

SOUTH ASIA: President Bhutto has denied a report that the release of Bangladesh President-designate Mujibur Rahman is imminent.

A Time magazine correspondent reports Bhutto told him on 31 December that he planned to free Mujib unconditionally on or about 7 January. Yesterday, however, the Pakistani Government officially declared that Bhutto had only stated his intention to speak on the matter shortly.

By freeing the Bengali leader prior to any Indo-Pakistani peace talks, Bhutto would be giving up his main potential bargaining chip. However, releasing Mujib would improve the atmosphere between India and Pakistan and probably would increase New Delhi's willingness to give back captured prisoners and territory.

The return of Mujib--a middle-of-the-roader who is regarded as Bangladesh's legitimate leader by the vast majority of the people as well as most political and guerrilla factions--would give a strong boost to the new government's efforts to solidify its control over the country. Mujib's presence would also overshadow the current competition for power among the political factions. Although some small leftist parties have recently been rebuffed in their efforts to gain entry into the cabinet, pro-Soviet elements in the ruling Awami League have been gaining in influence. When cabinet portfolios were redistributed last week, Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmad gained added responsibilities, and Abdus Samad--who, like Ahmad, is considered friendly to Moscow--replaced a pro-West politician as foreign minister. Moscow-oriented Communists are also being allowed to operate more openly.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh authorities, with Indian help, have already made some progress toward getting the country back on its feet. Rail and bus service reportedly has resumed in many parts of the

SECRET

country, and telecommunications links have been re-established with most areas. Many shops and banks are also reported to be back in business, as are most of the facilities at the country's main port, Chittagong. The Indian Army has been playing a major role in the restoration of roads, river crossings, and communications.

Dacca and New Delhi are also moving ahead with the repatriation of Bengali refugees. Prime Minister Gandhi told a news conference on 31 December that most of the nearly 10 million refugees would be in Bangladesh by the end of February, and that some 360,000 had already gone back. However, other Indian officials have stated that three to six months will be needed before all the refugees have returned. Some may be reluctant to go, but Indian officials have indicated that they might use compulsory measures such as cutting back relief aid to the camps in India. The Indian authorities are supplying departing refugees with a few days' rations and some money, and the Bangladesh government reportedly is setting up transit camps to provide temporary shelter.

Many non-Bengali Biharis, meanwhile, remain stranded at several locations in Bangladesh. Although food deliveries have reportedly begun to ease the situation in some of these places, at others the Biharis continue to suffer from serious food shortages and health problems.

25X1

MALTA-UK: British preparations for withdrawing UK troops from Malta highlight the continuing tension between London and Valletta.

The Maltese Government's last-minute extension to 15 January of its deadline for the departure of British troops was conditioned on Britain's limiting its activities to those connected with withdrawal. British forces have begun dismantling bomb stores, transmitters, and other military equipment, according to press reports, but London maintains its paid-up lease extends through 31 March.

Mintoff's quick visit to Tripoli on 31 December appears to have produced only limited results in terms of alternate financing. Some assistance, in the form of both grants and loans, was promised [redacted]

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[redacted] Libyan Prime Minister Qadhafi said he did not want to see Malta turn to the Soviet Union. But long-term assistance was left for future talks. Mintoff told the Libyans he hoped that the US might now offer assistance.

British Foreign Office Under Secretary Wiggin on 1 January raised the idea of US-UK talks about future negotiating steps. Wiggin said, however, that he does not believe an agreement both satisfactory and durable can be reached with Mintoff. He reiterated that the present British line is to see whether the imminent prospect of British departure would lead to sober second thoughts within the Government of Malta. [redacted]

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ISRAEL-JORDAN: Israeli fighter aircraft Friday morning made repeated penetrations over Jordanian air space. Jordanian military officials are dismayed and question Israeli motives for what they view as a provocative demonstration; one sortie remained 40 minutes, engaging in various maneuvers and creating sonic booms audible in Amman. The number and extent of the overflights reported by Jordanian and US observers are at odds with Israeli claims that the penetrations were minor and unintentional. The Jordanian Air Force did not attempt to intercept the aircraft, and Amman anticipates a volley of Arab criticism for not resisting the "Israeli enemy."

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EGYPT-ISRAEL: The Egyptian reaction to unconfirmed press reports from Washington that the US would resume delivery of Phantom jet fighters to Israel was prompt but has thus far been relatively restrained. The Middle East News Agency, quoting from an interview Friday with an "informed source," commented that such arms shipments would be a grave escalation of the Middle East crisis and would only encourage Israel to continue its "expansionist policy." The source stopped short of using the occasion to denounce the US role in promoting negotiations and closed no doors to Egypt's various diplomatic options. The issue is likely to be an important agenda item during President Sadat's scheduled meetings this week with his senior military and political advisers.

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